IRISH IN CALIFORNIA

La PENINSULA

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The Irish in San Mateo County

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La PENINSULA

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Table of Contents

The Irish in San Mateo County.....3
By James O. Clifford, Sr.

Belmont Park.....24

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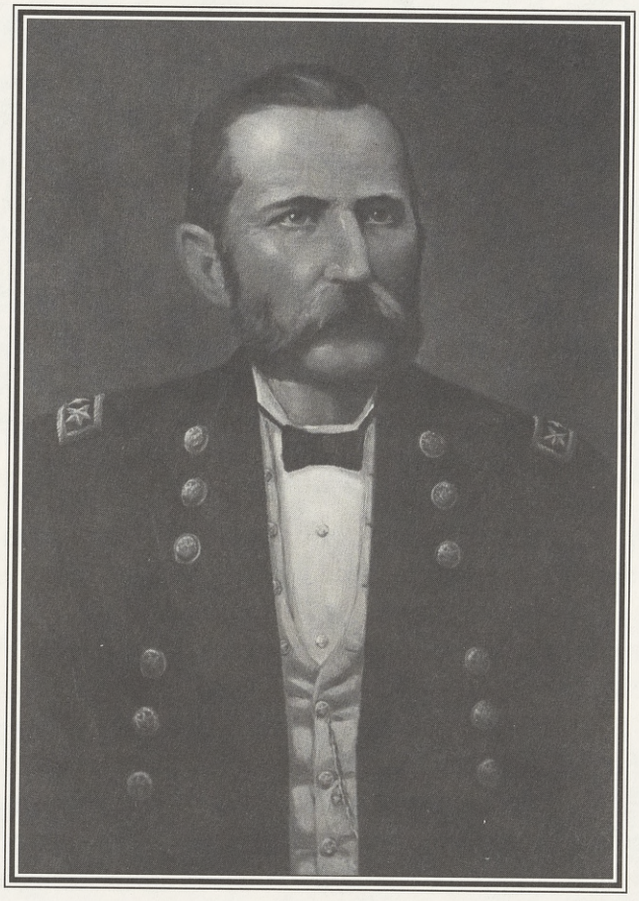
Cover photo:

Cullens Feed and Food *- The inside of Cullens Feed and Fuel about 1925, which was located at 348 Main Street in Redwood City. Cornelius Cullen is standing on the right. The man in the hat is unknown.*

The Irish in San Mateo County
By
James O. Clifford, Sr.

Members of a task force tracing the history of the Irish in San Mateo County could use a bit of that legendary Irish luck. They are starting from scratch, which is surprising considering the Irish once made up by far the largest group of immigrants to the county. Even today, the latest federal census shows that people of Irish and Scots-Irish heritage are the Peninsula's largest contingent of European-American offspring, about 10 percent when combined.

A quick look at the county map shows scores of Irish place names: Daly City, Thornton Beach, Sweeney Ridge, Fitzgerald Marine Reserve, Hickey Boulevard, McNee Ranch State Park, and Leo J. Ryan Memorial Park. There's even an Irish Ridge hiking trail off Skyline Boulevard in Woodside. Menlo Park is an Irish name. Really. Two Irishmen who came to the area in 1854 christened their property after their hometown: Menlough, County Galway, Ireland.

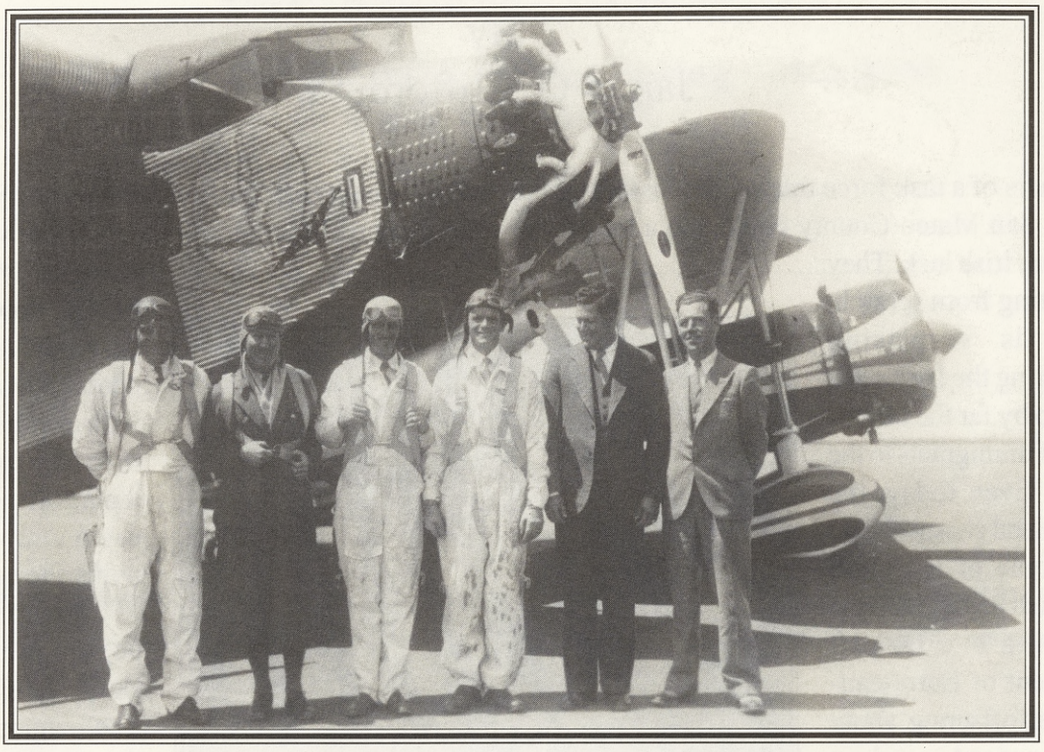


General Patrick Connor *- Irish-born Army General Patrick Connor, whose family lived in Redwood City, fought Arapahos in Utah and discovered silver in that state. He is honored with a statue at Fort Douglas, Utah.*

An Irish surname from the same era popped up recently in the news when San Francisco decided to open its watershed to limited hiking. The area involved included a trial that bore the name of rancher Anthony Cahill. A search of the archives of the San Mateo County Historical Association found an interesting yarn about a scary night experienced by Cahill in 1856. The information was in a 1922 issue of *San Francisco Water,* a magazine put out by the Spring Valley Water Company. The magazine recounted how Cahill and two other men decided to hunt down a grizzly bear that raided cattle herds in the area. Armed with axes and guns, the men took up posts atop a platform over a half-eaten cow. During the night, the bear returned - not solo but accompanied by an entourage of other bears. The magazine said the three preferred caution over valor and let the bears feast.

Why there isn't a history of the Irish on the Peninsula is anybody's guess. Most other groups recorded their experiences. The task force had one bit of luck. The San Francisco Roman Catholic Archdiocese celebrated its 150th anniversary (1853-2003) last year. The church newspaper, Catholic San Francisco, along with church archivist Jeffrey Burns, provided information on the rapid establishing of parishes in the county during the last half of the 19th Century. Mainly, however, it's been grunt work.

Sharon McQueen of Belmont has spent many hours in the museum archives chasing down anything with an Irish name or connection. She wrote what she learned on index cards and plans to tabulate the information by years and occupation. She already has broken it down to cities. Local history books were searched



B.M. "Mike" Doolin, second from left, with other early aviators at Mills Field before World War II.

for any mention of the Irish. There wasn't much. Just a paragraph here and there in the older books. A good ear for Irish names helped.

Some of the more famous include Silver King James Flood of Menlo Park, the Parrott family of San Mateo and other wealthy Irish who lived in Peninsula mansions.

There was also Congressman John McGrath, who served two terms under FDR. Another Irish politician from San Mateo County also found a place in the history books, albeit a tragic one - Rep. Leo Ryan who was killed in the Jonestown slaughter in the jungles of British Guyana in 1978.

One of the more famous San Mateo County Irish was Gen. Patrick Connor. While he barely gets a mention in local histories, Connor is huge in books encompassing the West. His name appears in such works as *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, Men to Match My Mountains and American Military History,* a thick volume published by the Army.

Connor's local claim to fame is that his family owned the Lathrop house in downtown Redwood City from 1870 to 1894. The house, a fine example of "Steamboat Gothic," is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The soldier, who married a Redwood City woman, fought in the Mexican War and then battled Arapahos in 1865 in Utah, where he took time out to discover silver and attempt to bring non-Mormons to the Beehive State. There is a statue to him in Utah where he is buried.

The research group also sought the public's help in its quest to gather information about the Irish experience in San Mateo County. News releases were sent out and bulletins were placed in libraries and community activities buildings. A few families that planted their Irish roots in the county more than a century ago came forward. Researchers hope to hear from others as word spreads.

The families with recorded histories include the Maloneys, Cullens, Tuites, and that of John Wisnom Elfving, whose great-grandfather, Robert Wisnom, was born in Ballycarry, County Antrim, in Northern Ireland in 1845 and came to San Mateo, in 1868.

The Wisnoms gather for an annual Thanksgiving dinner at the Burlingame Country Club. Last year marked the 130th such event.

The handiwork of the Irish is present in many key structures in San Mateo County. The dam at Crystal Springs, built largely by Irish labor, was the largest interlocking concrete block dam at the time of its completion in 1890. The engineer behind the Hetch Hetchy system that brought water to Crystal Springs was Michael O'Shaughnessy, who was born near Limerick City in Ireland in 1864.

Inside Linden Towers *- An interior view of one of the rooms inside the Flood Mansion.*

The Irish also worked on the railroad that runs down the Peninsula. Not only that, the financial genius behind the venture was Peter Donahue. The Irish played a part in the story of the now long abandoned Ocean Shore Railway. Some of the line's gradings are still visible on the county coast. John Downey Harvey, whose mother was born in Ireland, was president of the ill-fated line that operated along the coastline to around Half Moon Bay.

San Francisco International Airport has an Irish connection. The first director was Frank Flynn and the third was Mike Doolin. Both were World War I fighter pilots.

The most beautiful reminder of the Irish is the Ballroom at the Filoli mansion on the shores of Crystal Springs. The 70-foot long walls of the ballroom depict the hills and valleys surrounding the lakes of Killarney in Ireland.

Actually, there wouldn't be a San Mateo County without the Irish. An exaggeration? Perhaps. But consider the year the county was founded - 1856. The founding year, which is displayed prominently on the county seal, was also the year of the Second Committee of Vigilance in adjacent San Francisco. To this day, historians debate if the main aim of the vigilantes was to crush crime or rid San Francisco of a growing Irish Democratic political machine that was threatening the established power structure. Probably both.

This was a time when the thinly populated Peninsula was part of San Francisco, which was approaching 60,000 people. Some lawmakers felt that making San Francisco simultaneously a city and county under a consolidation act would end jurisdictional disputes in the prosecution of "toughs" then operating in San Francisco, according to an unsigned history of San Mateo County written in 1883.

The "toughs," who were almost all Irish, viewed the Peninsula as a great place to spread their wicked, wicked ways, which included prize fighting, gambling, and saloons. Their friends in the Legislature in Sacramento agreed to make San Francisco a city and county - but with the understanding that San Mateo County would be born.

So in 1856 San Francisco became a city and county, making San Mateo independent, a role reversal that reverberates to this day. San Francisco is dependent on the Peninsula for land to house water, prisoners and airliners, among other things.

This new arrangement was made to order for the San Francisco criminal element.

The initial election - to pick officers as well as the county seat - was replete with stuffed ballot boxes,

A Touch of Killarney *- Murals in the Grand Ballroom at the Filoli mansion on the shores of Crystal Springs Lake depict the hills and valleys surrounding Killarney Lakes in Ireland. The Muckross manor house in County Kerry, Ireland, was inspiration for Filoli.*

Home from the Hunt *- Unidentified but successful hunters stand in front of the McCormick and Son store in Pescadero, possibly around 1900. Brothers James, John, William and Joseph McCormick and their three sisters left Ireland for New York and California in the 1860s or 1870s.*

intimidation at the polls, and other illegal methods. The State Supreme Court eventually invalidated the results of the first election, which saw Belmont tabbed as the county seat.

More than 1,800 ballots were counted out of a total county population of 2,500; this, at a time when only adult males were allowed to vote. A second election was held the next year and Redwood City became the county seat. [1]

Most histories agree that brothers Bernard and Billy Mulligan and Chris Lilly played key parts in the fraud. The three were a specific kind of Irish, the kind depicted in the recent movie, "Gangs of New York." Tough both mentally and physically, they lived by their fists and wits.

Lilly had a big stake in what took place in the new county. He owned the Abbey House, a tavern located at the intersection of Mission Street and San Jose Avenue in what is now Daly City.

In 1842, Lilly became the first American bare-knuckle prize-fighter to kill a man in the ring when he fought Thomas McCoy at Hastings, New York. His part in the San Mateo County fraud led to his arrest by the vigilantes who deported him to Central America where he would die a violent death. [2]

Billy Mulligan, along with Lilly, learned the political trade working for New York's Tammany Hall. He too was deported by the vigilantes. Mulligan eventually returned to San Francisco. There he killed two men in a gunfight in 1865 before he was shot to death by a police officer. According to accounts, Mulligan, an alcoholic, was delusional to the point of fearing the vigilantes were after him once more. [3]

There were clues that the San Francisco crew would fail in the attempted takeover. The San Francisco Irish brought much of the big city East with them. At the time of the attempted coup, Peninsula residents, including the Irish, were trying to live off the land, mainly with farming and dairy ventures as well as logging, all callings needed to feed and house the giant city to the north.

There were, however, shared experiences in the era of the Gold Rush, which has been described as a time when "the world rushed in." For one thing, both the San Francisco and San Mateo County Irish came mainly from other parts of the United States, not directly from Ireland.

The aforementioned 1883 history of San Mateo County contained biographical sketches of 125 leading county residents, 20 or so of them Irish. Almost all of the Irish had spent time in another state.

The sketch of Belfast-born John Edgar, who arrived in Redwood City in 1858, noted that such movement was "characteristic of his race." Edgar became the county's first Republican sheriff in 1871 and held the post until 1878 when he was named a deputy warden at San Quentin Prison.

W.G. Thompson, the principal at Pescadero school, was born in Londonderry in 1827 and came to the U.S. in 1850. However, he didn't move to California until 1874.

John Hanley, a county deputy assessor, was born in Limerick in 1824 and arrived in America in 1842. He came to San Francisco in 1850 and moved to San Mateo County in 1856 (there's that year again) but only after stops in Canada, New York, Rhode Island and Louisiana. [3a]

Moses Rischin, a professor of history at San Francisco State University and author of *Immigration and the American Tradition*, noted that the very remoteness of California meant "that the Irish migration would be highly selective."

He wrote: "By contrast with the eastern seaport cities, they would come disproportionately from among the most adventurous and the most mobile, from among those who in so many cases had been seasoned for some years in one or more of the cities of the East and Midwest." [4]

Rischin's work is quoted in a book by historian James Walsh, who said statistics for the time are hard to come by. Walsh, a retired history professor whose field of expertise was the Irish in urban industrial America, noted that California's first attempt at a census resulted in fragmentary returns in 1852. In addition, fire destroyed the federal census of 1850.

One historian said the population of California was about 15,000 in 1848 but added the estimate did not include native peoples. In the 1870s 30 percent of the California population was of domestic or immigrant Irish stock. [5]

Despite the lack of more official and specific figures, history books make it clear there was an Irish presence in California before the Gold Rush. The War with Mexico from 1846 to 1848 brought hundreds of Irish members of a New York outfit

called Stevenson's Regiment to the shores of the Pacific. Many stayed on, but it is not known if any remained on the Peninsula.

Even earlier, Irish Catholics had a leg up when California was part of Mexico. One had to be a Catholic to become a Mexican citizen. An outstanding example of this took place in Marin County where Timothy Murphy became a Mexican citizen in 1839. Don Timoteo Murphy went on to serve as mayor of San Rafael, a land commissioner and justice of the peace.

The religious requirement was a barrier for some

Crystal Springs Dam Workers - *Hundreds of Irish workers were in the crews that built Crystal Springs Dam. When completed in 1890, it was the largest concrete dam in the world.*

Protestants - but not all. Richard Henry Dana noted this situation in *Two Years Before the Mast* when he wrote that some of his fellow Americans found it convenient to leave their "conscience at Cape Horn."[6]

San Mateo County's First Irishman?

An Irishman may very well have been one of the county's early non-Hispanic European settlers. Some history works refer to John Copinger (also seen with two "p"s) as an "Irishman." Others call him an "Englishman."

Frank Stanger, the respected Peninsula historian, wrote that Copinger was a "well-known Englishman," the same description that appeared in the 1883 history. [7]

Dorothy Regnery, whose chronicles focused on the Woodside area, was very specific. She said Copinger was born the son of Alderman John Copinger in Dublin. She also cleared up the matter of two ps or not two ps. [8]

It was the Catholic branch of the family, which was centered in Cork, that used "pp," she revealed. The Catholic Coppingers included a John Coppinger who served with an Irish brigade that defended the Pope in Italy's revolution of 1860. He then came to America, served in the Union Army and retired as a general.

Alan Hynding's *From Frontier to Suburb* said Copinger was born in Dublin in 1811. To mix things up even more, a Mexican document says he was an American. Copinger could very well have been born in Ireland, but considered himself English. He lived during a time when the English ruled all the Emerald Isles. [9]

Whatever his birthplace, Copinger, say most accounts, was a deserter from the British Navy or merchant marine. He eventually made it to the Redwood City area, converted to Catholicism and married into a local Mexican family, the Sotos. In 1840, Mexican officials granted him 12,000 acres, much of it in the Santa Cruz Mountains around today's Crystal Springs reservoir. Copinger died just seven years later.

Copinger's widow married John Greer, an Irish Presbyterian sea captain who did not "leave his conscience at the Cape." Greer, who left his ship and joined the hunt for gold before coming to the Peninsula, gave land for a school in the Woodside region that enrolled 112 students by 1859.

One early Peninsula pioneer left no doubts of his Irish heritage. Dennis Martin was Irish, Catholic and proud of being both.

Religion was one of the main reasons Martin's father, William, decided to bring his family to California, according to Regnery's *The History of Jasper Ridge: From Searsville Pioneers to Stanford Scientists.* The family left Ireland and ended up in Missouri, which, at that time, had few Catholics. A priest convinced William Martin that Mexican California would welcome Catholic families.[10]

So the Martins of County Wexford came to California in 1844 as part of the first immigrant party to bring wagons across the Sierra. Dennis became a hero when he returned to the mountains to rescue a stranded immigrant.

According to Patrick Dowling's book, *Irish Californians*, another Wexford-born Martin also arrived in California by wagon train in 1844. He was Edward Martin, who became a founder of the powerful Hibernia Bank in San Francisco. The book does not state if the two were related, but there would come a time in Dennis Martin's life when he could have used a banker's help. But first his path would cross those of both Copinger and Greer. [11]

Dennis Martin, who became one of the most successful lumber men in the Woodside area, bought land from Greer that was supposed to be part of the acreage previously owned by Copinger. Many grants were disputed after the United States defeated Mexico and this paper work was among the contested documents.

The Gwin Act was adopted in 1851 to settle Mexican land claims and titles in California. The United States Land Commission decided that the 1,500 acres Martin purchased belonged to neither Greer nor Copinger. Martin, who had built two sawmills, a home, barns and corrals, was finished. Martin's holdings are now part of the Thornewood Open Space Preserve. The mill sites are located on a creek named after Martin who died in San Francisco in 1890, a poor man struggling to pay off his debts. Future generations, particularly Catholics,

would owe Martin a debt.

The debt was acknowledged in 1987 in a history of Redwood City's Mount Carmel parish. "The modern structure grew from a seed planted by Dennis Martin over 134 years ago," wrote author Suzanne Josvai. [12]

When Martin came to the area there were no permanent Catholic churches between Mission Dolores in San Francisco and Mission Santa Clara to the south. Martin wanted a place to hold services for loggers and residents. In 1853 he helped establish the first Catholic Church in San Mateo County. The church located in Searsville was named St. Denis. The year of dedication was in the landmark year of 1856. The pioneering church thrived until the late 1870s when logging activity dropped off and people started moving to the bayside towns. It was reestablished in 1961.

A Faith-Centered People

The Irish and the Catholic faith are so entwined the two are almost one, particularly during the 19th Century. This does not mean all Irish are Roman Catholic, but the vast majority are. To understand this closeness it is necessary to take a look at the forces both faced in the early years of the state. One can only come away with a better understanding of the term "besieged."

In the 1850s the anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic American Party, commonly known as the "Know-Nothing Party" because its members were tight-lipped, had a powerful following and elected a governor in 1855. The logo of the Second Committee of Vigilance in San Francisco was an all-seeing eye - a symbol also used by the Masons, which Catholics considered a secret society and thus off-limits. The committee, coincidentally, was organized at the offices once occupied by the American Party on Sacramento Street. [13]

To be fair, the direct targets of the vigilantes were just asking for trouble. One of the latest books on the 1856 anti-crime movement is *Against the Vigilantes*, written in 1999 by San Francisco attorney John Boessenecker. There was no doubt some vigilantes were motivated by anti-Irish and anti-Catholic bias, he said. "Others may have resented San Francisco's large Irish working class and the cheap labor it provided," he continued.

The author concluded, however, that "loss of faith in the legal and democratic process was the principal cause of San Francisco vigilantism in 1856."[14]

That loss of faith must have been building for some time, because the Committee of Vigilance was highly organized and efficient.

History books agree that the spark that led to the vigilantes taking over law enforcement was the assassination of newspaper editor James King of William by politician James Casey. The journalist, who exposed Casey's criminal past, was shot and fatally wounded on a San Francisco street.

Within three days, the committee put 3,000 men on the streets and Casey was hanged. The figure grew to around 9,000, a force backed by a fort and 30 cannon.

What the history books seldom - if ever - mention is the viciousness of King's anti-Catholic editorials. One historian who did note King's crusade was Sister Mary Aurelia McArdle, a Mercy nun, who spent her last years at the order's Burlingame complex. She researched his work and came away appalled.

One editorial was "reminiscent of the Nunnery Inspection Laws which the Know Nothing Party sponsored in the East," she wrote in *California's Pioneer Sister of Mercy*. [15]

King called convents "dens of Papal superstition" and demanded the grand jury visit them to make sure women weren't being held against their will.

It wouldn't be the last time the Sisters of Mercy, an Irish order, faced bigotry. In 1925 the Ku Klux Klan burned a 40-foot cross on a hillside near the Burlingame convent. The nuns also received threatening letters and phone calls . In addition, cars carrying white-hooded men circled the convent as horns honked.[16]

Despite such incidents, the anti-Irish and anti-Catholic opposition in the San Francisco Bay Area was not as powerful as in the East, which had a longer history, according to professor Walsh, who taught at San Jose State University.

"Unlike Boston, New York, or the other commercial and industrial cities of the Northeast, San Francisco lacked an entrenched establishment,"

he wrote in *The San Francisco Irish, 1848-1880*. The Irish, he continued, "were not easily shouldered aside in competitive scramble for the good things this new society offered." [17]

Another reason may have been that in the West the Irish were considered more "white" than they were in the East. Note that the earlier mentioned 1883 history of San Mateo County referred to the Irish as a "race."

University of Wisconsin history professor Linda Jordan delved into this neglected aspect in her book *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction*.

St. Denis *- Dedicated in 1853, the rustic structure was the Peninsula's first Roman Catholic Church. It was on the property of Dennis Martin, who was born in Ireland and came to California in 1844.*

Jordan's work recounts the 1904 saga of nuns who brought 40 Irish orphans from New York to Arizona where they planned to place the children with Catholic families who happened to be Mexican. The non-Mexican population of the town kidnapped the children rather than see them go to Mexicans.

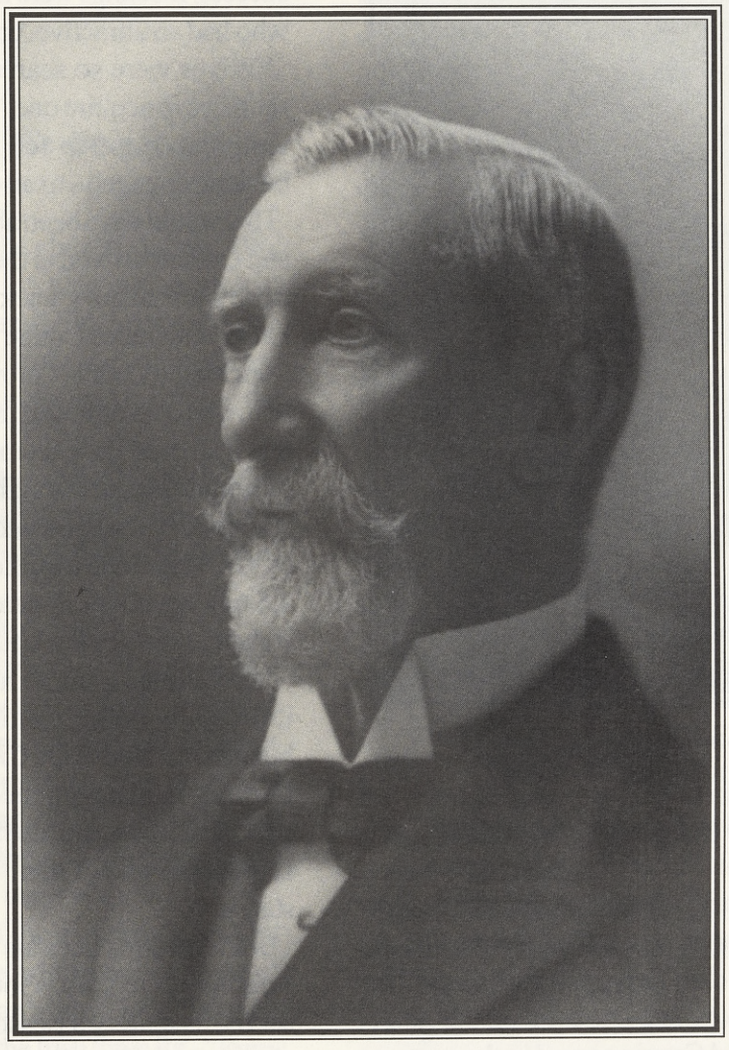
The train ride had "transformed them from Irish to white," Jordan wrote. She pointed out that the 1911 edition of the U.S. Immigration Commission's Dictionary of Races of People recognized 45 races among immigrants to the United States.[18]

Whatever the reasons, the Irish population of San Mateo County swelled, relatively speaking, during the latter years of the 19th Century.

Census statistics for 1880 show the Irish topping the number of immigrants to San Mateo County at nearly 900. This was a time when European immigrants accounted for 33 percent of the county's population of 8,700.

There were Irish communities in San Mateo, Colma and Redwood City in 1860, according to Philip Alexander's *History of San Mateo County*, which was published in 1916. The Irish names in San Mateo included Casey, McNamara, Morgan, Burns, and Claffey. In Colma, there were the Thorntons, Dolans, Rileys and McMahons.

Power came with the increased numbers. By the 1870s, the rolls of San Mateo County supervisors had already included a Kelly, Crowley, Monahan and Mullen.



Senator James Byrnes

Even earlier, in 1853, James D. Byrnes, who was born in Tipperary in 1831, became involved in San Mateo politics and went on to represent the county in the California Senate. His home, built in 1875, was a showplace located at 703 First Avenue, San Mateo. Nothing, however, reflected the increasing presence of the Irish as the building of their churches.

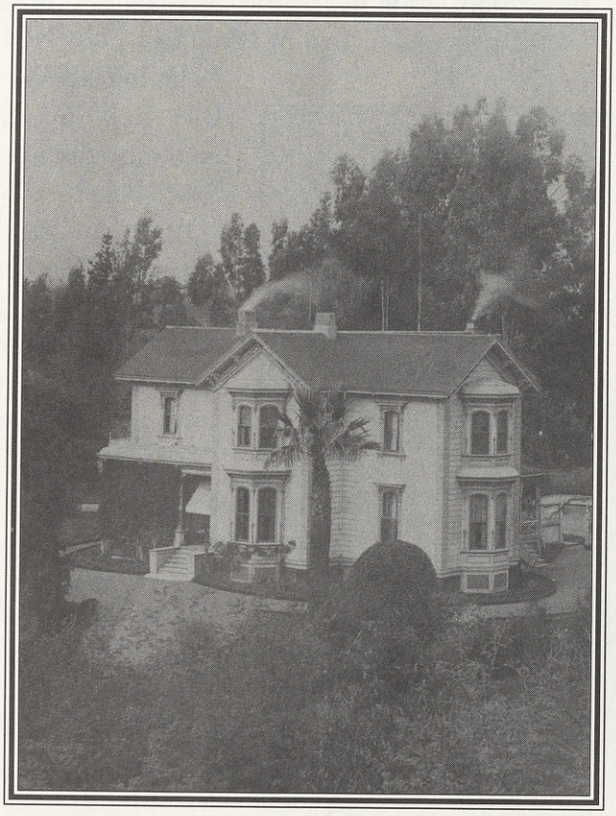
New Catholic parishes followed St. Denis in quick succession during this period. St. Matthew's in San Mateo was established in 1863, Our Lady of the Pillar in Half Moon Bay in 1868, St. Anthony Mission in Pescadero in 1868, Nativity in Menlo Park in 1877, Our Lady of Refuge Mission in La Honda in 1883 and Our Lady of Mount Carmel (Originally St. Mary's) in Redwood City in 1887.

Not only did the Irish predominate in the pews, they also held sway on the altar. Just look at the list of pastors at Mount Carmel. The names include Dempsey, O'Riordan, O'Sullivan, Conlan, Sullivan, Kennedy and Cavanagh.

The Dempsey was Father Denis Dempsey, who was born in Dublin in 1838. "Dynamo" would have been a good nickname for this priest. He was appointed pastor of St. Matthew's in 1863. Mount Carmel in Redwood City also came under his jurisdiction. Father Dempsey also celebrated Mass at St. Denis and at Half Moon Bay, then called Spanishtown. Not only that, he served Catholics in Menlo Park and Colma.

The priest was a true circuit rider. He put a notice in the *Redwood City Gazette* in September of 1863 to announce that Mass would be held at San Mateo on September 6th, at St. Denis on September 13th, at Redwood City September 20th and at Spanishtown on September 27th.

Those who succeeded Father Dempsey as pastor at St. Matthew's included Father Timothy Callaghan



Byrnes house at San Mateo; a portion still remains.

who arrived in 1884 and served for more than half a century. Then came Father Henry Lyne who was born in Ireland. Father Edward Meagher, the sixth pastor at St. Matthew's, also hailed from Ireland. In fact, St. Matthew's didn't have a native Californian as pastor until 1956, when a priest with the good Irish name of Bernard Cronin served in the post.

The increasing number of churches is an indicator that family life was catching on in San Mateo County. In 1860, females of all ages made up less than a third of the total county population of 3,214. "This peculiar coloration of the population accounts for the tardy development of schools and churches," wrote Peninsula historian Frank Stanger. [19]

In 1885, Mount Carmel opened a school for 88 children that was located at El Camino and Brewster.

"Here was the greater number of young children who would profit by such an institution," recounts a history of the Notre Dame Sisters' efforts on the Pacific Coast entitled *In Harvest Fields by Sunset Shores*.[20]

An anecdote about a Sons of Temperance post in Woodside around 1860 sums up the gender imbalance. The group impressed observers as something remarkable for a lumberjack town. Someone finally figured out the reason for the post's success: meetings were held in the home of a widow who had an attractive, unmarried daughter.

"Wives were so scarce as to justify almost any sacrifice to acquire one," wrote Frank Stanger. The temperance group fell apart when the daughter became engaged - to an outsider!!

This would have been about the time the Maloneys and Cullens arrived in the county. Both families can trace their history back to that era, according to Father Lawrence Cullen Goode's family history.

San Mateo County "provided them with a standard of living so far removed from famine-plagued Ireland that it all must have seemed like a dream," he wrote.

Famine-plagued is right. The famine of 1845-49 was not the first in Ireland but it was the most severe by far. More than a million people died. More than 2.5 million, about 30 percent of the population, left Ireland, most for the USA.

The Cullens seem to have been connected with railroading before getting into the feed and fuel business in Redwood City. The Maloneys were in farming and later opened a livery stable in Menlo Park. The Maloneys also had relatives in Half Moon Bay where one of their 19th Century homes still stands.

Both families became involved in politics. P.J. Maloney, the Rev. Goode's great-grandfather, served as county assessor from 1882 to 1886. He also was a school board trustee, as was Patrick Cullen.

A love for education ran in both families. Father Goode says his grandmother, Maggie Maloney Cullen, taught in the early days of the San Mateo County public school system, a tenure that saw her teach in a one-room school near Pillar Point.

"She was vice principal of the Menlo Park School when she retired at age 30 to marry our grandfather," he said.

In general, San Francisco, the Peninsula and California were very good to the Irish - and vice versa. By 1870 San Francisco had 27 bankers and brokers who were born in Ireland. In politics, San Francisco had an Irish mayor in 1867, 13 years ahead of New York and 18 years before Boston.

The Saga of the Fenians

In addition to the love of the church, most of the recent arrivals had something else in common: a passion to free their native land. San Mateo County was the site of gatherings of thousands of members of the Fenians, a movement dedicated to driving the British from Ireland.

The Fenians are one of those ignored chapters in American history. They certainly weren't ignored in Canada. The group had a profound impact north of the border.

The Fenians actually invaded Canada.

The nationalistic group held picnics in Belmont, San Mateo and Redwood City. The 1870 event in Redwood City drew 12,000 people and special trains were needed to bring the Fenians in from north and south. This at a time when the city had less than 1,000 residents. Guards had been hired for the event, fights broke out and a few arrests were made.

Contemporary accounts of the gatherings are a bit condescending, with some noting the amount of alcohol that flowed. One can almost hear the anti-immigrants' warnings about the Irish three Rs - "Rum, Romanism and Rebellion."

The San Mateo County Gazette estimated that 15,000 people attended the 1866 picnic in San Mateo.

"To the credit of the Irish, they disappointed many who anticipated a disorderly riotous rabble," the newspaper reported in its May 26, 1866 edition. It noted there were few drunks, "considering the amount of liquor" involved.

The San Mateo picnic took place the same year Fenian forces invaded Canada and provided the highlight of the American chapter of Fenian history.

What would the Fenians gain by invading Canada? For one thing, they hoped to draw British troops from Ireland in order to make rebellion easier in their homeland.

Their ranks filled with veterans of the Civil War, a contingent of about 1,500 men crossed the Niagara frontier and met a Canadian force at Ridgeway. The disciplined fire of the American veterans was too much for the raw Canadians who retreated. The Fenians then went to Fort Erie where they captured a small Canadian force. The Canadian officer in charge escaped by shaving off his Dundreary whiskers and fleeing in disguise, according to Canadian historian Edgar McInnis. The Irish forces became cut off when the United States sent a gunboat to prevent reinforcements. Most of the Fenians were arrested, but they were released without trial. [22]

The Irish who came to America with a drive to free their homeland included the ancestors of Tom Tuite of Portola Valley. His grandfather, also Tom Tuite, left County Mead in 1902 and settled in Redwood City where he built the Palace Market at 825 Main. Many still remember the free hot dogs and candy he gave them when they were children, his grandson said.

Tuite's grandfather raised funds for Ireland's fight for freedom and returned to the land of his birth many times. Eamon de Valera, the Irish president, was a "good friend."

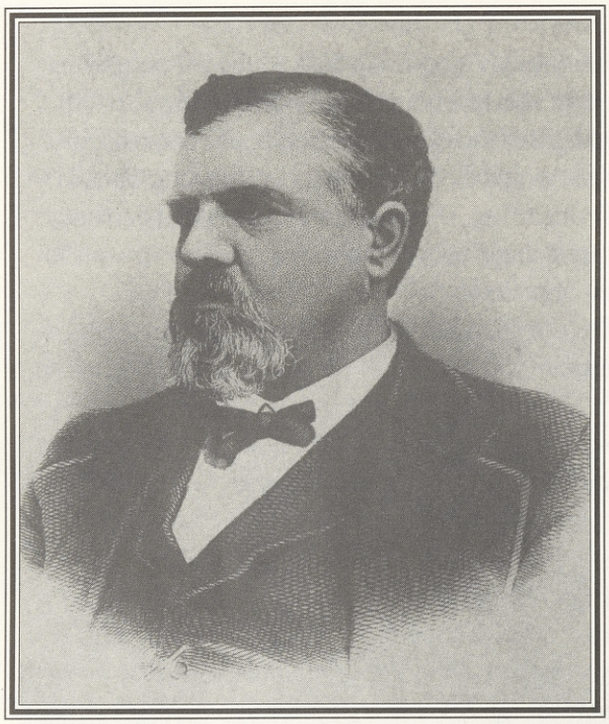
"The Irish newspapers ran announcements he was meeting with the President whenever he returned to Ireland," Tuite added.

His grandfather, who also owned acreage in Half Moon Bay, died in 1961 at the age of 86.

"He never forgot Ireland."

The Rich and/or Famous

A contemporary survey to determine the most famous San Mateo County resident of Irish stock would probably come up with Tom Brady, the Serra High School of San Mateo quarterback who went



James Flood *- One of the "Silver Kings."*

on to the pro ranks. Older people might favor entertainer Merv Griffin, who hails from San Mateo where he attended St. Matthew's elementary school and San Mateo High. Or perhaps crooner Bing Crosby, who made his home in the county after leaving Hollywood.

If the poll was restricted to history lovers, however, James C. Flood might get the nod. Flood, who was born in New York in 1826 shortly after his parents arrived from Ireland, tried his hand in the California Gold Fields. Then he went from working as a bartender in San Francisco to become one of the "Silver Kings." He settled in Menlo Park where his mansion, Linden Towers, was a landmark with few rivals.

Legend has it that Flood picked up stock tips while tending bar and parlayed them into a fortune. Flood and fellow barkeep William S. O'Brien joined forces with Nevada miners John Mackay and James Fair. All the men, except Flood, were born in Ireland. All became multimillionaires. The mine gave out in 1897 after yielding approximately $136 million.

James Flood, who died in 1889, used his millions to buy more and more San Francisco property. "The day came when he owned most of downtown San Francisco and his rents amounted to $500,000 a month," Irvine Stone wrote in *Men to Match My Mountains.* [23]

For sheer opulence, however, Linden Towers took the cake. In fact, a wedding cake is what many people said it looked like.

The largest mansion west of the Mississippi when completed in 1880, Linden Towers had 43 rooms topped with turrets, cupolas and gables that were watched over by a 150-foot tower. The interior matched the exterior for conspicuous consumption. Bathroom fixtures were made of Comstock silver. The dining room table seated 40 and the high-backed chairs were so heavy few servants could move them without help, according to *Menlo Park: Beyond the Gate* by Michael Svanevik and Shirley Burgett. [24]

Svanevik and Burgett said that despite their money Flood and his wife, Mary, were not accepted by the Peninsula's upper crust. Mrs. Flood was often "the brunt of ridicule and gossip." Flood's background was just too "vulgarian."

A mile-long wall was added to the estate in 1907 by the couple's son, James L. Flood, who was born in 1857. The wall on Middlefield Road is still evident today. Flood the younger also added a sensational chapter to the family history that could quite easily be regarded as "vulgarian."

Svanevik said James L. Flood was the family black sheep, a "notorious man-about-town" who was a disappointment to his parents.

The son lived in San Francisco with his first wife, showgirl Marie Rosina Fritz. Before the marriage, the father had offered Fritz money to stay out of his son's life.

The couple, who married in Italy in 1887, had a daughter, Constance May. The mother died suddenly in 1895 and four years later Flood married his sister-in-law, Maud Lee Fritz. Constance May was sent to live with nuns in Kansas City. The new Floods had three children but "Maud Lee apparently wasn't interested in raising her sister's child," according to *Beyond the Gate*.

James L. Flood died in 1926 and shortly after a woman named Constance May Gavin claimed to be the daughter and an heir to the Flood fortune. The woman received a $1.2 million settlement in 1934.

Just four weeks after the settlement, it was announced that Linden Towers would be torn down and the land turned into the Lindenwood subdivision.

Maud Flood lived in a mansion in San Francisco and then moved to a nine-room penthouse in the

The Flood Family *- Rose Flood standing next to James L. Flood, and Constance May Flood Gavin on the porch of Linden Towers.*

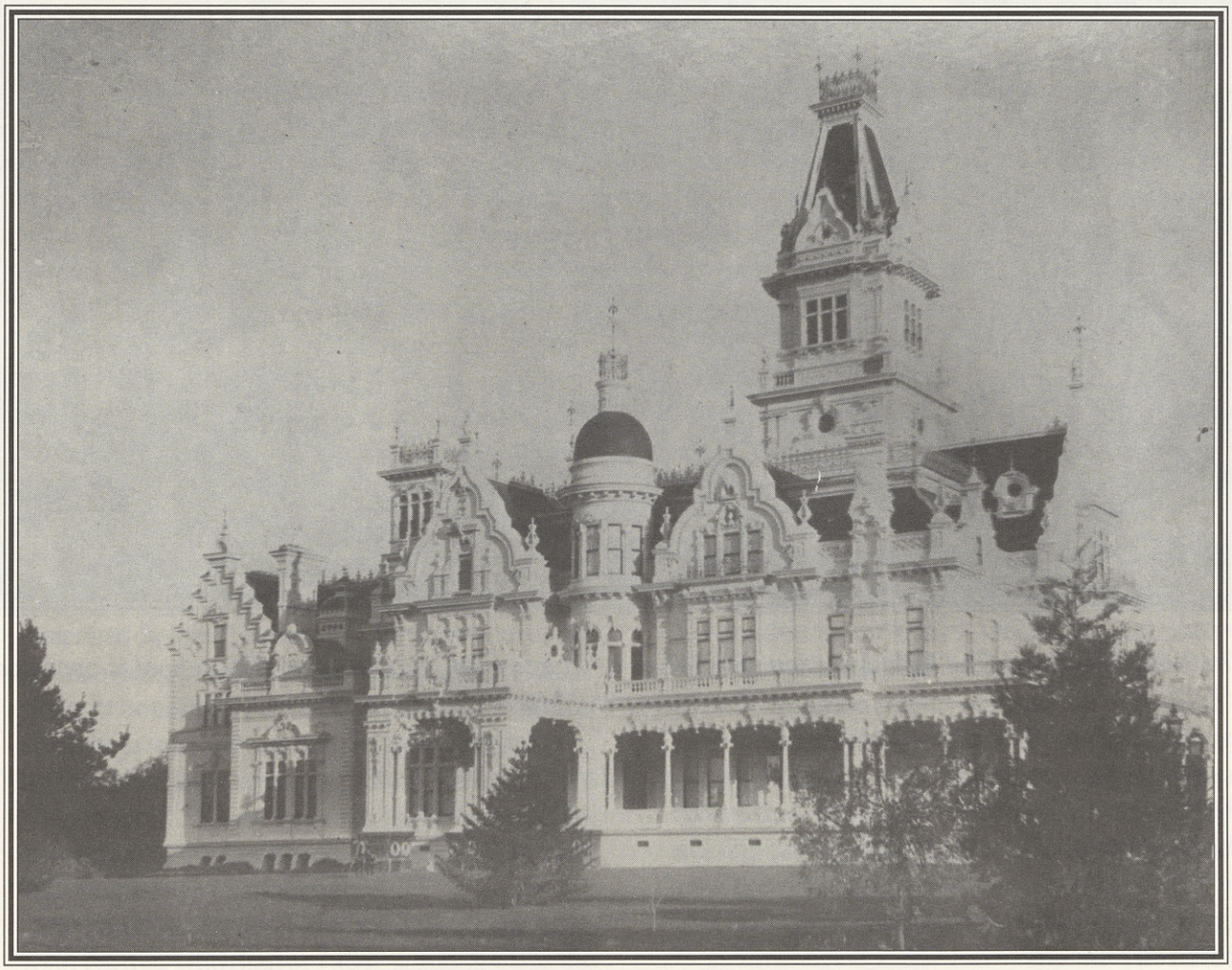
Fairmont Hotel where she resided for 24 years until her death in 1966 at the age of 90.

The tearing down of Linden Towers troubled James C. Flood's great-grandson, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported in its July 4, 2003 edition.

"It would have been a fabulous museum or park or our San Simeon," he said.

The coming of the railroad linking San Francisco and San Jose in 1864 made it possible for the wealthy to work in San Francisco and live in huge homes on the sunny and rustic Peninsula.

Flood wasn't the only Irish Silver King whose money helped build a Peninsula mansion. Maria O'Brien Coleman inherited $4 million from brother William O'Brien, who died in 1878. She bought 165 acres in Menlo Park and started work on a Victorian home. According to some, the home, which was vacant for years, had something Flood's mansion never had - a ghost.



Linden Towers - *The ornate Menlo Park home of Silver King James C. Flood, whose parents were from Ireland. The 43-room home was topped by a 150-foot tower. Flood was one of the four "Silver Kings" and the only one not born in Ireland.*

Mrs. Coleman's daughter-in-law, Carmelita Nuthall, was killed when a gun went off in her San Francisco home in 1885 in a shooting deemed accidental.

Historians Svanevik and Burgett wrote that "for years there have been reports of sightings of a beautiful young woman in a diaphanous green dress" stalking the halls of the mansion, which became the Peninsula School in 1925.

Sound familiar? The story brings to mind the ghost that supposedly haunts the Kohl Mansion in Burlingame. The Kohl Mansion now serves as Mercy High, a school operated by the Sisters of Mercy. An Irish order, of course.

The Kohl Mansion *- The Kohl Mansion now serves as Mercy High, Burlingame. The school is operated by the Sisters of Mercy.*

Other Great Homes of the Irish

Menlo Park didn't have a monopoly on Irish mansions, but it certainly had its share. Holm Grove was the 40-acre estate obtained by San Francisco banker Joseph A. Donohue in 1868. Now part of Menlo-Atheron High School, Holm Grove was the site of a three-story Victorian home that contained a chapel and hydraulic elevator.

Menlo Park boasted the 400 acre preserve of lawyer John T. Doyle who built a sprawling, two-story wood frame home called Ringwood, also in 1868. Doyle's neighbors included author Gertrude Atherton, who visted him often to enjoy his extensive library, reportedly one of the best in the state.

Doyle's main claim to fame, however, was his role in the Pious Fund case, which became the first dispute brought before the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague.

Several lawyers became involved in the case which went to the courts in the 1870s and didn't end until the Hague ruling in 1902. But it was Doyle who helped get the ball rolling. Essentially, the complicated case stretched back to 1697, when missionaires settled in Baja California. The litigation involved private money donated to support the work of missionaires in California. The Mexican government seized the fund in 1842 and refused to make payments for the missions after the United States victory in 1848. The Hague court placed Mexico's liability at $1.4 million, plus an annual annuity of $43,000 to be paid to the U.S. for the Catholic prelates of California.

The wealthy families that called San Mateo County home during this era included the Parrotts, whose matriarch, Abigail Meagher Parrott, was the daughter of James Meagher of Rathcash, County Kilkenny.

Abigail, who was born in Maine in 1829, came to California in 1853 after marrying John Parrott, an American diplomat, banker and merchant who would go on to make a fortune in San Francisco real estate.[25]

Parrott bought 377 acres in San Mateo and built an inviting structure surrounded by a verandah. The home was enlarged in 1868 and dubbed "Baywood." It was the first of the great Irish mansions on the Peninsula, according to Patrick Dowling's *Irish Californians*. [26]

The home became a center for helping the poor. John Parrott, who died in 1884, stipulated that the hungry should find comfort at the splendid structure and never be refused help. "Abby" Parrott made this promise an article of faith. More than a hundred homeless might sit down for meals that was "of the same quality and abundance as that which was set before her own family," Dowling wrote.

The poor could even stay overnight on estate land and were frequently seen singing songs around a campfire.

The Catholic church was the recipient of much of Mrs. Parrott's largess and the results can be seen today. She contributed $50,000 toward the building of St. Matthew's Church. In addition, she set aside a part of the Baywood estate for a cemetery called St. John's.

Abby and John Parrott, who had eight children, are buried in a section of St. John's reserved for the Parrott family. A massive monument of Florentine Renaissance stone marks the family plot. The inscription on the back of the Parrott vault reads:

St. John's Cemetery
Given to The Catholic Church of San Mateo
In Memory of John Parrott
Born in Virginia, April 16, 1811
Died in California, March 29, 1884

Abigail Parrott, who passed away in 1917, left another legacy that attested to her love and charitable nature. Her husband had two children born out of wedlock when he was a bachelor in Mexico. By all accounts, these offspring were treated as if they were Mrs. Parrott's own.

The Parrott's apparently were just one, big, happy family. As adults, the children stayed in the area and made Baywood their focal point.

"Every day was like Christmas at Baywood, with all the comings and goings, christenings, confirmations, birthdays, weddings, and parties celebrating this and that," Dowling wrote. [25]

Not far from the Parrott Mausoleum in St. John's is the final resting place of Father Timothy Callaghan, who served as pastor of St. Matthew's for 45 years. Callaghan, who was born in County Cork in 1845, was famous for his daily treks around town in which he helped the needy. When he died in 1937, *The San Francisco Examiner* recalled how the priest "...gave money and comfort to anyone who asked, regardless of creed or color."

Baywood *- Baywood, the ornate San Mateo mansion of the John and Abigail Parrott, was one of the earliest of many great houses on the Peninsula. It was located on a 377 acre spread west of El Camino Real.*

Team Hopes for Public's Help

The Irish research team hopes that word will spread, and it will hear from people whose families may not be in history books but have stories worth recounting.

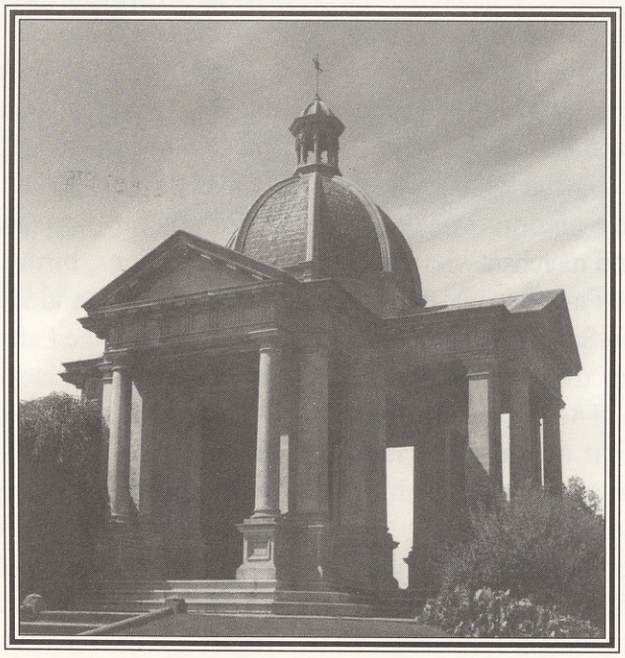
"They're out there," said Mike McQueen, chairman of the San Mateo County Irish Heritage Council. "And we need to hear from them."

An Irish name is not a must, McQueen added. Elfving is hardly an Irish name, but John Elfving, a residential broker in Burlingame, provided the researchers with information about his great-grandfather, Robert J. Wisnom.

Among other things, Robert Wisnom built stores, commercial buildings and homes in downtown Burlingame and San Mateo. He also organized the National Bank of San Mateo.

"I feel privileged to be part of the hard-working Wisnom family who left Ireland with nothing and helped create the booming economy in San Mateo County," Elfving said.

With any luck, the history detectives will hear from others who feel the same way about their heritage.



St. John's Cemetery *- John and Abigail Parrott are buried in a section of the cemetery reserved for the Parrott family.*

END NOTES

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[25] Dowling, p. 323.

Note on the writer:

James O. Clifford, Sr., a resident of Redwood City, was a journalist for over thirty years with United Press International and later with Associated Press, from which he retired. His articles have appeared in periodicals such as *America* and he is a frequent contributor to the Letters to the Editor section of local newspapers.

Belmont Park

The Irish News of May 16, 1868 reported that 8,000 to10,000 Fenians went to a picnic at Belmont Park by rail. The line of passenger cars stretched half a mile and was powered by at least three engines. Other Irish groups occasionally picnicked at Belmont Park, including the Hiberians.

Such picnics helped Irish people get together for social and recreational purposes. The Fenians and other political groups used the picnics to inform the crowds about the situation in Ireland. They also gave their recommendations on how to vote on local matters.

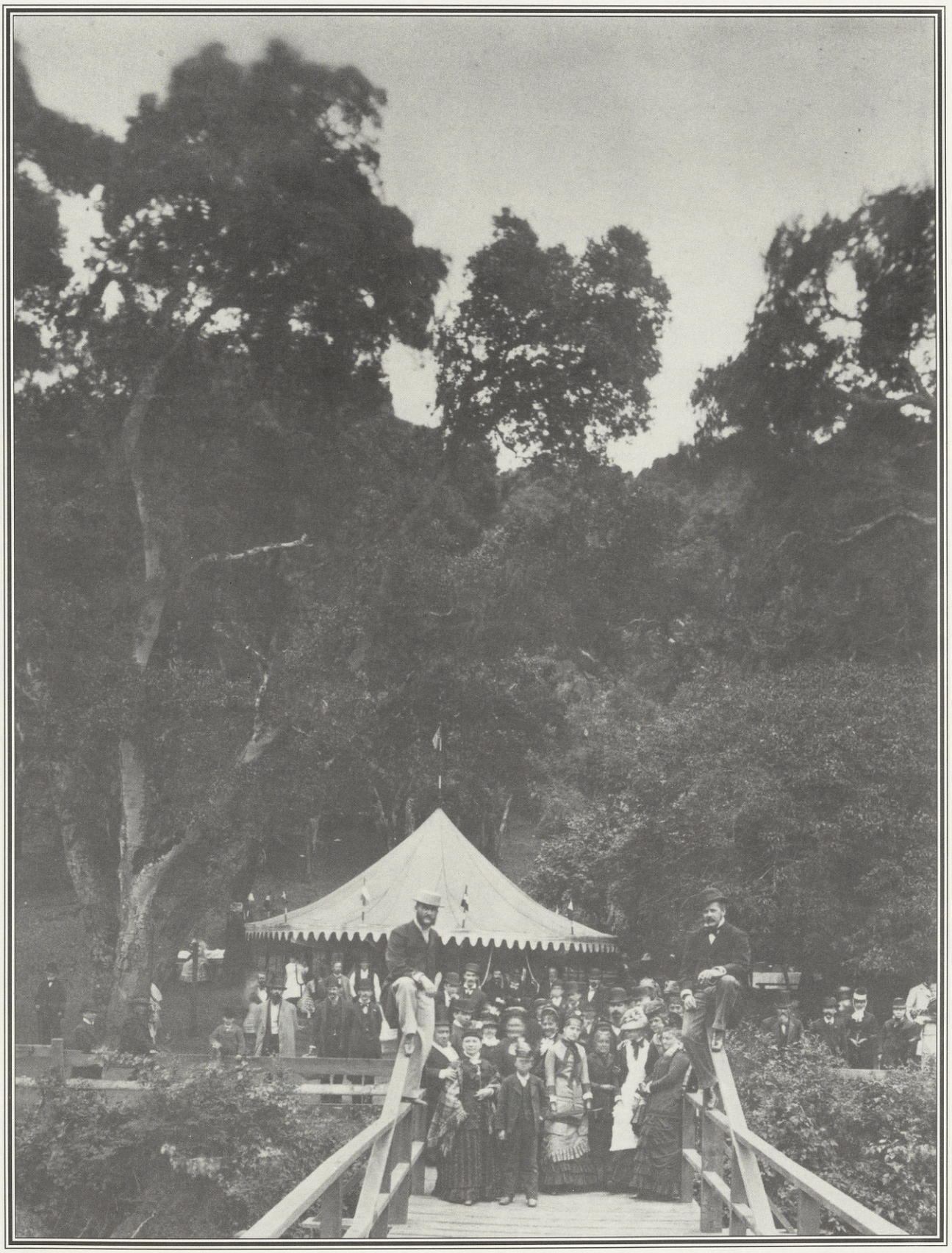
It may sound unusual to have such large crowds down the Peninsula, since San Mateo County still numbered only 6600 people as late as 1870. However, the San Francisco/San Jose Railroad was completed in 1864, and the recreational advantages of the Peninsula were recognized by all classes of San Franciscans, including its numerous foreign born populations.

Redwood City Children Visit Belmont Park.The photo was taken by James Van Court.

Recognizing the potential for renting out a picnic complex, Carl Janke, a native of Germany, created Belmont Park, about 1866, patterning it after a Hamburg biergarten. Janke's Park's entrance was located a few hundred feet southwest of today's Sixth and Ralston Avenues. It ran west up Ralston along the creek nearly to today's College of Notre Dame. Bayleaf, oak and buckeye trees grew everywhere within the 12 acre property.

Janke dug a water well and built a dance pavilion that could contain 300 people. It had large glassless windows, a barroom, ice cream parlor and lunchroom. The circular bar allowed for a keg of beer to sit in its middle. Paths were connected by a variety of bridges. A shooting gallery and running track were among the improvements to give everyone something to do.

Sadly, as the years went by, the Park developed a reputation for drunkenness and brawling. Despite the efforts of the various picnic groups to police themselves and Janke's installation of a jail under the dance floor, the rowdy behavior never abated. In 1880, a killing took place when fighting between two San Francisco gangs broke out. A little girl named Annie Mooney disappeared at a picnic and was never heard from again. Finally, the Southern Pacific put a stop to the excursions. Destruction of railroad property became so severe, it made the special trains unprofitable. Before the turn of the century Belmont Park was closed. A city park, Belmont's government center and a portion of its downtown now occupy the Belmont Park site.



Belmont Park *- Families routinely gathered at Belmont Park for picnics and other community affairs.*

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and funding for the Museum's projected
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The Association also thanks the City of Belmont for its assistance in creating
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